

by Kyle Gann

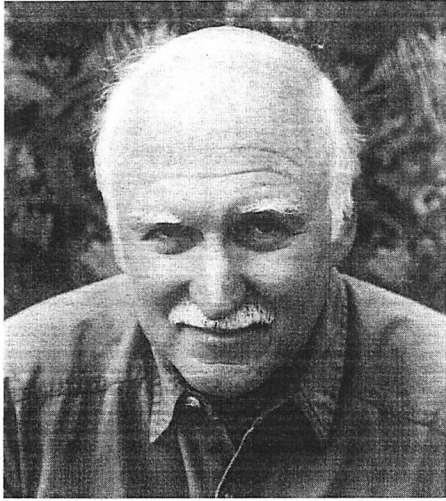
It's the poor composer whose day job is in music: the composer who curates concerts, who administers a performance space, who writes music textbooks, who works as a critic. Known to musicians for what other services he can provide, everyone forgets that he's a composer, forgets to inquire about his music, forgets to include his name in lists of potential repertoire. Composing is the most invisible of functions: anything else you do well seems to block it from people's sight.

The day job isn't quite Jan Swafford's problem—he's a lecturer at Tufts University—but his musical reputation does lie elsewhere at the moment, and if you're trying to think where you've heard that name before, think Charles Ives and Johannes Brahms. For Swafford is currently basking in the justified acclaim given to his two excellent biographies: *Charles Ives: A Life with Music* (W.W. Norton, 1996) and *Johannes Brahms: A Biography* (Knopf, 1997). The latter is thorough and beautifully written, and I refer to it frequently; but it's the Ives book that really restores

Jan Swafford

dignity and common sense to the reputation of a brilliant innovator whom, for some reason, most other musicologists seem to want to psychoanalyze into a neurotic, dissembling mess. Swafford's is the number-one Ives book I recommend to everyone.

You see the problem: write a couple of great books and someone who tries to write about your music ends up talking about your books instead. Your very achievement works against you, for how



could someone capable of such superb writing and scholarship also write good music? Besides, we approach the balance of creativity and scholarship with a certain hypocrisy. Rhetorically, we elevate the composer far above the scholar, one being potentially immortal and the other being little more than an interchangeable drone. But practically speaking, we almost involuntarily treat a thick, well-researched book as a more substantial achievement than a symphony: the first is bound to get into libraries, have some impact, generate a little money, and bolster academic credentials; while the second can so easily turn out to be an ephemeral self-indulgence. Few, I imagine, would find the achievements equivalent, yet the balance swings either way. We raise glasses to toast the composer/author but secretly place our bets on the author/composer.

Nevertheless, I admit that it was my intense enjoyment of *Charles Ives: A Life with Music*, a few years back, that sparked a dim memory that I had once received a promotional copy of a CRI disc with the name Jan Swafford on it. If I expected his music to sound like Ives's, I was disappointed, but there are certain qualities in common. One is freedom from dogma, evinced in a willingness to move between tonality and atonality as the spirit of the

moment demands. Another is a sometime association of tonality with nostalgia and place, especially audible in Swafford's 1992 orchestral prelude *Late August*, based on harmonica playing he heard in his Tennessee youth. Another is a contrast between hesitant, improvisatory passages and other sections where the music "gets going" and falls into an infectious groove.

In fact, just as Ives was, at heart, a Romantic whose imagination bubbled over into modernist devices, we'd have to call Swafford, with reference to the current musical landscape, one of the New Romantics. One of the earliest ones, in fact: his quite tonal orchestra piece *After Spring Rain* dates from 1981–82, just before Jacob Druckman coined the term New Romanticism for the New York Philharmonic's "Horizons" series. While *After Spring Rain* builds up some of its continuity with repeated orchestral chords in a rather John Adams-ish way—it was composed at the same time as *Harmonium* and *Grand Pianola Music*, Adams's first works to use that technique—nothing could be further from Adams than the wandering flute duet with which *After Spring Rain* opens, nor in the poetic way that that duet returns near the end between a bass drone on C and high Fs and E-flats in the violins. Swafford owes nothing to Adams, nor to minimalism.

Nor, apparently, to twelve-tone music. Swafford isn't one of the self-consciously "postmodern" New Romantics; there are no quotations nor style evocations, as in Bolcom or Rochberg. The music gives no sense of having backpedaled from modernism out of populist guilt, nor is there any vestige of pitch-set thinking, nor any hint of serialist fragmentation. His music is unremittingly lyrical and linear. The only affinities that have come to my mind while listening have been, here and there, Carl Nielsen (those flute melodies over a low drone hark back to the Dane's *Fifth*), and the less ironic moments of Stravinsky's neoclassicism. It is almost as though Swafford were a late-late-late Romantic

composer from some country even more peripheral than Finland that had just now come into its own. A graduate of Harvard and Yale, he is hardly a *naïf*; but he has not been drawn into the aesthetic squabbles of twentieth-century music. His style, if not so trademark as to be recognizable from a phrase, is entirely his own.

That style is mostly couched in a harmonic and textural ambiguity that clarifies into tonality and calm, perhaps even fun, by the end. His 1991 string trio, *Requiem in Winter*, starts on isolated, quiet, dissonant chords, and moves by first movement's end to a saintly melody in G major. Likewise, after some painful questioning, the third movement breaks into a folksy dance in C major. *Midsummer Variations* for piano quintet (1988) begins with creepy dissonant tremolos, but soon moves to gentle string undulations over a delicate piano filigree, marginally tonal and haunting. Like Ives, Swafford occasionally (especially in *Requiem in Winter*) makes striking use of quarter-tones as in-between notes in a tonal context. And every now and then, as in *Late August*, the orchestra piece about his childhood, he's not at all ashamed to lay down a jazzy groove and sing catchy tunes over it.

One notes in Swafford's list of compositions a dearth of entries after 1993, during the years in which he must have been heavily researching Ives and Brahms. Two orchestra works (one titled *Adirondack Interlude*) and a piano trio have followed more recently. Incorrigible, however, he is working on a Beethoven biography. It will probably be excellent, and win more awards. But don't expect too much of it—after all, Swafford's *really* a composer.

Composer Kyle Gann is a professor at Bard College and the new music critic for the Village Voice. His most recent book is American Music in the Twentieth Century (Schirmer Books). His music is recorded on the Lovely Music, New Tone, and Monroe Street labels.